

UNDERSTANDING AND USING KENTUCKY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CORE CONTENT

In August 2000, the Kentucky Early Childhood Development Authority approved the Kentucky Early Childhood Professional Development Framework. The Framework includes information about Core Content; Trainer, Director & Commonwealth Child Care Credentials; Training Levels; Articulation; and Scholarships. Kentucky's Professional Development Framework serves as the basis for professional development activities across the state. This document provides information about the Kentucky Early Childhood Core Content including specific strategies for using Core Content.

What is Core Content?

Core Content is the specific knowledge, competencies, and characteristics needed by early care and education professionals to work effectively with young children and families. Core Content provides a framework for the development and evaluation of training content, course content, and competency standards for professional performance.

Why do we have it?

During the 2000 Kentucky General Assembly, the KIDS NOW early childhood development initiative was created to help ensure "that all young children are healthy and safe, possess the foundation that will enable school and personal success, and live in strong families that are supported and strengthened within their communities" (KIDS NOW, 2000). One component of KIDS NOW was the creation of a seamless statewide system of professional development. To this end, work groups were formed to research and make recommendations related to five key areas: core content, credentials, training, articulation, and scholarship.

A Core Content work group drew from existing literature, professional resources and models from other states to develop Kentucky's Early Childhood Core Content. The workgroup took into consideration five recommended aspects of training, education and credentialing (Oberhuemer & Colberg-Schrader, 1999). These included multiple entry paths, principles of child development, cooperative and differentiated leadership in the classroom, a meaningful role for parents, and responsiveness to cultural pluralism.

Recognizing that early childhood professionals enter the field with a variety of skills and experiences, the plan for implementation of the Core Content allows for multiple pathways for entering and exiting training programs. Kentucky's Early Childhood Core Content provides a list of core competencies that are divided into 7 subject areas across 5 levels of increasing mastery. The Core Content is intended to be used by early childhood professionals, administrators, pre-service and in-service educators as a resource for planning training, and professional development opportunities.

The Core Content can be used in a variety of ways, depending on your role in the early care and education field. Specific information and strategies for how to use Core Content are presented below. Information and strategies are organized by role: early care and education professionals, directors of early care and education programs, university faculty, community and technical colleges systems faculty (KCTCS), child care resource and referral agencies, regional training centers and professionals providing training and technical assistance.

Early Care and Education Professionals

Most early childhood professionals are drawn into the field by their commitment to the healthy development of young children. In addition to this commitment, quality care and education must include continuous professional development that guides the caregiver through increasing levels of knowledge and skills. Research has documented that education and training of the professional has a direct result in the quality of a classroom (Kontos & Wilcoz-Herzog, 2001)

Identifying Current Levels of Knowledge and Skills

For those providing direct care to young children, the Kentucky Early Childhood Core Content outlines 5 levels of knowledge and skill across 7 subject areas. Early childhood professionals can review each level to determine their current knowledge base and to plan a path for future training. Each level includes specific concepts/skills that have a positive impact on young children. By following the recommendations presented in the Core Content, early childhood professionals can meet higher standards of practice for serving young children and families.

The Core Content is used to assist with writing and revising job descriptions, employee evaluations and professional growth plans. Early childhood professionals can assess their own level of skill in each Core Content area. Once areas for improvement are identified, early childhood professionals can seek and obtain training that addresses their personal professional growth. Both pre-service (institutions of higher education) and in-service trainers will follow Kentucky's Early Childhood Core Content in the development of training opportunities. This will help ensure that high quality information is available and presented in a format that meets the needs of those participating in training events and/or coursework.

Professional Growth Plans and Long Range Goals

Access to and coordination of training opportunities is a critical component of ensuring the use of appropriate practices in early childhood programs. Acknowledging that early childhood professionals enter the field with a variety of life experiences and education, the Core Content offers multiple pathways for professional development.

Skill development occurs through a number of venues, and each person will have skills at a variety of levels. Using the Core Content as a guide, early childhood professionals can set short and long term goals that are practical and achievable. Achievement of these goals can occur by the coordination of training opportunities and by accessing the KIDS NOW Scholarship program for those who desire to pursue the Commonwealth Child Care Credential, the Child Development Associate Credential (CDA) the Associate's Degree or the Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood.

Program Improvement

As individual early childhood professionals clarify and address their own professional development goals the entire staff of a center becomes a more cohesive team. Through the enhancement of each person's talents and skills, overall program performance improves. The end result is improved working conditions for staff and improved program quality for children and families.

Directors

Directors fulfill many roles in administering programs for young children and families. One primary responsibility is that of planning and guiding the professional development of early childhood staff. Through the process of recruiting, interviewing and hiring staff, directors can use Kentucky's Early Childhood Core Content to identify and fill gaps in staff knowledge and skills. By using the Core Content as a tool for guiding professional development of current staff, directors can empower early childhood professionals to assess their own knowledge and skill levels and select training opportunities that address their specific needs.

Developing Professional Growth Plans with Staff

The Kentucky Early Childhood Core Content is a helpful tool for ensuring that staff development is proceeding in a thorough and practical manner. Each early childhood professional enters the field with his/her own expectations and experiences. Utilizing the Core Content to individualize professional development plans can help assure that training experiences are appropriate for each staff member, and will best meet the needs of the overall program.

Acknowledging the uniqueness of early childhood programs and the multitude of talents each professional brings to the classroom, the Core Content is designed as a flexible document that can be adapted to each person's needs. Through continuous, systematic professional growth early childhood professionals can improve the quality of care they provide to young children and increase professional competence and personal satisfaction as well.

Job Descriptions and Staff Evaluations

The structure of the Core Content offers much assistance to directors as they hire, evaluate, and develop professional growth plans for staff. Each level clearly denotes specific knowledge and skills that can be used for writing and updating job descriptions. Including the core competencies appropriate to each job title/position aids directors in achieving a balance of education and practical skills among staff. Through assessment of current staff qualifications, directors can identify gaps and facilitate recruitment and selection of new employees.

The Core Content is also intended to assist directors in preparing for and conducting staff evaluations. Consistent and on-going staff evaluations are a fundamental administrative function of staff development. The purpose of evaluations is to assess current performance and set goals for obtaining increased knowledge and new skills. Each level of the Core Content is a prerequisite to the next and can be used to plan and monitor professional growth plans specific to each person's abilities and needs.

Programmatic Planning

Viewing early childhood professionals as life long learners creates an environment of continual and systematic improvement that benefits children, families and staff. Mentoring staff in the use of Core Content to evaluate and plan for their own professional pathway empowers early childhood professionals to contribute to the improvement of the overall program. As staff progress through increasing levels of mastery, early childhood professionals will improve family/community partnerships, learning environments and curriculum, as well as facilitate and support early childhood advocacy.

Institutes of Higher Education (*Pre-Service Training*)

A key component in the progression of early childhood professionals in the career lattice is articulation to and across institutions of higher education. The Kentucky Early Childhood Core Content provides the framework for a credentialing system that creates a seamless transition to and between degree programs.

The establishment of practitioner levels and standards of professional performance in the Core Content assists early childhood professionals in viewing themselves as lifelong learners. Through the KIDS NOW early childhood initiative, previous barriers to articulation are being addressed. Financial assistance through the KIDS NOW scholarship program and individual guidance provided by Professional Development counselors at each Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, provides the support that many early childhood professionals previously lacked.

Credentialing

The creation of the Commonwealth Child Care Credential, Director's Credential, and Trainer's Credential has provided multiple opportunities for early childhood professionals to acquire increasing levels of professional development. The new credentialing systems ensure that early childhood professionals have access to training that addresses their professional needs as identified by the Core Content and results in a credential recognizing their competency.

Articulation

With implementation of the Early Childhood Core Content, early childhood professionals can now enter a seamless system of professional development that promotes the transition of training into practice and instills motivation to pursue further education.

Following the Core Content in degree programs ensures that classes offered through institutions of higher education are designed to expand and refine the knowledge and critical skills of early childhood professionals. It allows individuals to assess and document their current level of knowledge and skills across seven specific subject areas, thereby allowing them to work with faculty to design a program plan that acknowledges past experiences and course work.

Faculty can use the Core Content as a way to assess the current content of their courses in early childhood. The differentiation between knowledge and skills at the Associates, Bachelors and Master degree levels should assist faculty in ensuring that those enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Early Childhood programs at all levels are offered a continuum of knowledge and skills throughout their course work.

Linking Training/Education to Program Improvement

As early childhood professionals seek and obtain increasing levels of mastery through training and formal education, the quality of care and education for Kentucky's youngest children will improve. Following the framework of the Core Content creates classrooms where environments and curriculum reflect recommended practices in the early childhood field. The Core Content has been designed to respond to the ever increasing knowledge of evidence based practices and the implications of changing practice on children and families. Therefore, following the Core Content allows early childhood professionals to expand their knowledge base and refine skills leading to increased personal and professional satisfaction, thereby facilitating the attraction and retention of qualified persons to provide early child care and education services.

Training Entities and Organizations (*In-Service*)

A multitude of skills are required of every early childhood professional and each person brings a variety of talents and life experiences to share with the children and families they serve. In order to enhance these talents and skills, early childhood professionals in licensed facilities are required to obtain 12 hours of annual training and additional hours in the STARS for KIDS NOW voluntary quality rating system.

In the past, training opportunities have been limited to a collection of unrelated workshops. No system existed for approving trainers and categorizing levels of trainings. The Kentucky Early Childhood Core Content provides the framework for standardizing training experiences by delineating specific competencies, from basic to high level skills across the early childhood education continuum.

Credentialing

To ensure that early childhood professionals have access to training that correlates with their professional development needs, Kentucky has established the Trainer's Credential. The Trainer's Credential includes 5 levels of education and experience in the Core Content areas. At each successive level, trainers may conduct workshops with increasingly complex content and expected competencies.

Training Design

For the first time, early childhood professionals in Kentucky can assess their own professional performance by validating their knowledge and skills in seven distinct subject areas. As each person determines his/her own level of knowledge and skill in each area, they are encouraged to seek and obtain professional development opportunities that fill the gaps in their current knowledge and skill base. Trainers offering training at the in-service level must respond by developing and providing training opportunities that include introduction to, practice with, and tools for application of new skills in the classroom based on the Kentucky Early Childhood Core Content.

As Kentucky's credentialed trainers design and present training opportunities for early childhood professionals it is incumbent that such training experiences be available across all seven content areas at each of the five levels of mastery. Individuals enter the field with a wide array of skills and degrees of knowledge. It is therefore important that they have access to training that meets their individual needs. To that end, in-service trainers should utilize the Core Content in training needs assessment and as a tool to determine gaps and avoid duplication in professional development opportunities.

Articulation

As early childhood professionals seek increasing levels of education, many may choose to seek the Commonwealth Child Care Credential, Child Development Associate Credential (CDA), Associates or Bachelors degree by accessing the support of the KIDS NOW scholarship program. Kentucky's new seamless system of professional development promotes the transition of training opportunities to formal programs in institutions of higher education by allowing transfer of credentials as college credit. As trainers design training experiences, they should keep in mind the content and skills that are addressed through other credentialing programs. Their goal is to enhance, not duplicate, their learning experiences.

Linking Training to Program Improvement

As individual early childhood professionals use the Core Content to assess their professional development needs and seek appropriate training, the overall quality of programs serving young children will improve. Through access to training based on the Core Content, early childhood professionals will improve classroom environments, curriculum planning and family involvement.